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Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem? Reflections on teaching participatory asset mapping

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Abstract

Community asset mapping is widely employed in a diverse range of community development programmes, including work with indigenous groups. Here we discuss the outcome of a participatory asset mapping training programme we were asked to deliver for social and community work students and academics at a university in Peninsular Malaysia. The attendees were planning imminent intervention work with the indigenous Orang Asli communities of Tasik Chini, Pahang, Malaysia with whom we were undertaking our own separate research at the time. The underpinning philosophy and approach of participatory asset mapping is discussed in terms of its use in the community context. A self-reflexive analysis of research relationships and trainer responsibilities is explored in this discursive, conceptual paper.

Keywords: asset mapping, indigenous communities, Malaysia, reflexivity

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Context and introduction

Environmental damage and socio-political drives towards modernization and integration into mainstream society, the latter a central social policy for all ethnic groups in Malaysia (Nicholas, 2000; Nicholas et al., 2002), have exacted a significant toll on the lifestyles and wellbeing of the Orang Asli (the indigenous peoples of West Malaysia). Our research and the asset mapping exercise discussed here focused on the Orang Asli communities living around Tasik (Lake) Chini in Pahang, Malaysia.

A genuine attempt to seek the views of indigenous people concerning their wants and wishes for the future is fundamental in redressing some of the socio-environmental harm experienced, and in serving to actively incorporate Orang Asli voices into future planning. We were, therefore, pleased when, conducting fieldwork for our own ethnographic research, we were asked to offer training to faculty and students at a prestigious university in Peninsular Malaysia, and to introduce a participatory social research perspective to the work of their research group, which hitherto was fundamentally orientated towards the natural sciences.

The Tasik Chini Research Centre had undertaken work on the environmental damage that mining, logging and damming had caused to the Tasik Chini area, and now, by training their social science students, were seeking to understand how the indigenous communities might be assisted through education and economic development and to collect data on the social, cultural, economic and educational assets of the local Orang Asli community, which was predominantly made up of the Jakun tribe. The focus of our own distinct research work that we were undertaking at the time we delivered the training was to understand sociologically the impact of serious ecological degradation

of the local environment of the lake and forests of Tasik Chini constituting unrecognized but traditional native territory for the Jakun Orang Asli people there. Heavy mining in the immediate vicinity of the lake has resulted in seepage of toxins, where pollution has been severely aggravated by the ill-conceived building of a dam between the lake and the tributary river of Sungei (river) Chini flowing into the great Pahang River. The dam prevents the flow of monsoon floodwaters, critical for the ecological health of the lake's once rich biodiversity. In addition, deforestation through logging has been rife, and where wide-scale monoculture palm oil plantations have replaced forests (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014b). The disruptions caused to the livelihoods of the local communities through these measures have been severe and act as a grievous assault upon their cultural and spiritual connections to the land (Ashencaen Crabtree, in press).

This paper does not discuss our ethnographic research, but briefly introduces asset mapping before presenting and reflecting upon our teaching of participatory approaches and the disjuncture between this method and the subsequent survey-based asset mapping approaches deployed with the Orang Asli at Tasik Chini by those attending our training. Thus, this is not an empirical research paper *per se* but rather a discursive and conceptual one that considers some of the consequences resulting from the top-down rather than participatory methods employed. It offers ways forward based on our reflections and learning as trainers.

Asset mapping – evidence from research

A community asset map offers an inventory of community strengths, resources or 'assets'. In itself it is value-neutral, its moral and philosophical direction influenced

by those undertaking it. Community asset mapping has employed a variety of methods to achieve its outcomes, not all of which are compatible with sustainable and participatory community development thinking (Graham et al., 2011; Kramer, et al., 2012; Lightfoot et al., 2014). Different tools have also been developed to map communities from external positions, on behalf of or with communities, such as Diehl et al.'s (2008) software tool for community knowledge development. Again, of central importance in the use of technologies are the moral and politico-philosophical positions of the researchers. This, in turn, demands negotiation with partners at the outset and constant reflexivity from researchers or researcher-participants.

Survey approaches may often reflect the researcher's views rather than those of the people and so be skewed towards accepted and unspoken perspectives that indicate the dominance of certain power relations. Participatory Rural Appraisal, by contrast, seeks to offset inequalities in power relations and develop a data collection method that takes its lead from those within the communities who are part of the appraisal, as shown in dengue prevention work undertaken in Sarawak (Ashencaen Crabtree, Wong and Mas'ud, 2001). Participatory approaches employ communities' vocabularies to describe assets and methods of data collection that do not necessarily rely on the written word but are culturally specific and may include drawing, acting, and other visual displays of data.

Developing social maps of demographic and hierarchical variables with those affected helps in understanding their perspectives, which, in turn, aids interpretation of the data specific to that community. It can represent a powerful tool to engage a community in identifying its own strengths and using these to create wanted change

within that setting. Data are collected concerning strengths, attributes and resources within individuals, groups and communities; these may include physical, economic, social, psychological and spiritual capital. Such participatory techniques also demand critical reflexivity on the part of those deploying them (Chilisa, 2012). Participatory asset mapping builds on the premise that every community and its members has a supply of 'assets' that can be used to solve community problems and that these can be identified through the mapping process, which should be transformatory and allow communities to develop themselves. Thus it challenges and potentially realigns traditional power relations.

Asset mapping, in a wide variety of forms, has been widely employed in public health (Wang and Pies, 2004; Baker et al., 2007; Semenza, 2007; Griffin and Farris, 2010; Santilla et al., 2011; Willems et al, 2012; Makelarski et al., 2013; Whiting et al., 2013, together with urban planning, creative and cultural planning (Evans and Foord, 2008; Gibson et al., 2012a; Lee and Gilmore, 2012). In the areas of sustainability, community work, and work with indigenous groups participatory asset mapping has also grown in importance, recognizing the centrality of co-produced understandings and a more democratic and power-balanced approach to asset and need identification (Underhill-Sem and Lewis, 2008; Del Campo and Clark 2009; Martin et al., 2012). In preparing our training we noted, however, that vested interest has often driven the models and methods of mapping at Tasik Chini and wanted, according to the brief given to us, to ensure that we imparted the knowledge and skills to conduct ethical participatory asset mapping to the students attending.

Previous work, to reduce the risk of an outbreak of dengue following identification of

a high *aedes* mosquito index, undertaken in East Malaysia rather than West Malaysia where our current training work was undertaken, indicated the success of the approach but also the problems with embedding such democratic practices (Ashencaen Crabtree, et al., 2001).

A key element of asset mapping involves abandoning a 'top-down' approach in favour of a 'grass-roots' one. However, Baer (2006) comments, in terms of health policies, that 'bottom-up' approaches are rarely used by Malaysian bureaucrats. By contrast opting to work from the community level upwards is a highly deliberate choice and represents an act of consciousness-raising by researchers towards the community under study. This situation remains despite the culturally embedded notion of *gotong-royong*: focused community action, which would otherwise suggest that grassroots approaches are commonplace in Malaysia. It was our aim in the training to ensure that bottom-up, participatory approaches were promoted and internalized by the students and faculty attending the workshop.

Study and methods

Following preliminary meetings and discussions with faculty, a half-day workshop was held with social work, community work and social science students and faculty at a university in Peninsular Malaysia. Overall, around 70 people participated, learning about participatory asset mapping and the principles behind these approaches, whilst undertaking reflective group exercises to interrogate their own beliefs, lifestyles and value bases, and examining how these may have an impact on work with disadvantaged groups, especially the Orang Asli of Tasik Chini.

Participants were predominantly young, female undergraduates including a mix of mainly Malay, some Chinese and Indian Malaysians, a few Indonesians and, at least, one Orang Asli postgraduate student. We did not collect demographic data on participants but noted these characteristics as we undertook the workshop. The students were chosen by university faculty for participation, largely because of their assignment which concerned undertaking an asset mapping exercise within the Orang Asli communities at Tasik Chini.

The curriculum for the two-part workshop was action-focused, using experiential exercises to embed learning. In the first part we introduced existing research concerning asset mapping and methods, focusing, in particular, on participatory approaches – the workshop accepted the following foundational presumptions and principles, which we considered central to adopting a participatory approach:

- the Orang Asli represent a marginalized and disadvantaged group of indigenous tribes in contemporary Malaysia
- their voice is paramount to the success of social research initiatives that claim to be transformatory or emancipatory
- participatory action research may result in unexpected findings
- externally sponsored research may have different agendas to the Orang Asli
- research with the Orang Asli should be participatory, seek to equalise power relations, and promote the voices and perspectives of participants
- self-reflection/reflexivity is important (see Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014a)

We then asked participants, working in small groups, to identify their own beliefs and values using the following as examples: social position, income, ethnicity, religious belief, lifestyle, identities, culture, political beliefs, education, socio-economic status, gender, age, family structures, aspirations for the future, friendships, community networks. Having examined their own positions we subsequently invited the participants to consider the impact of their beliefs and values when planning and conducting their asset mapping activity:

a. *When working with people who have different positions and beliefs to yourself, how do you deal with it, and does this help you to reflect on your positions in the world?*
b. *How do you feel about the position of the Orang Asli in general and specifically at Tasik Chini?*
c. *How would you go about finding out what the people want?*
d. *How will your beliefs and views affect your asset mapping work?*
e. *What might you need to reflect on in order to undertake such a mapping exercise?*

An outline of what was involved in participatory asset mapping and how it may be undertaken was provided in the second half of the workshop. Stress was laid, again, upon the importance and centrality of equal participation and voice for community mapping to be successful in achieving lasting community changes. Students actively took part in the work and developed their understanding reflexively through the activities. The second activity focused more specifically on the planning for the asset mapping work and asked participants to consider three things:

1. *Discuss and plan ways in which you will develop asset mapping in the Tasik Chini villages.*

2. *How will you engage the Orang Asli as co-researchers? What media (e.g. drawings or video or theatre) might you employ to gain information for your asset mapping?*

3. *Discuss what the findings may tell you as a participatory research group, about the needs of the Orang Asli villages.*

Ethical approval for our research was granted through Bournemouth University's research ethics committee and through the Malaysian Research Centre's ethical review process. However, as a separate piece of work, the workshop attendees were invited to share their reflections on the activities undertaken after explaining what the research entailed, that written or verbal comments would all be anonymised, and to what use the information would be put. Since all attendees were required by their university to complete a practical participatory (so we assumed) asset map in the weeks following the workshop, all agreed. To what extent this would have been the case otherwise is not known; however, there were no risks involved in sharing this data so we might assume consent was indeed voluntary.

Student perceptions of participatory asset mapping and the Orang Asli

Data were collected from students participating in the workshop activities. In general, the findings indicated that students were keen to uphold indigenous rights and to assist in development projects where possible, although the latter betrayed evidence

of the myths of backwardness, economic and social need often associated with the Orang Asli (Carey, 1976; Nicholas, 2010; Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014b; Ashencaen Crabtree, in press) – see the following:

> 'We feel the Orang Asli still live in traditional cultures that lack facilities. They want to live with complete facilities. So we are going to help them out to develop their area so that they can live life to the fullest'.

In the exercises undertaken clear binary distinctions were drawn between how the students perceived themselves, as modern Malaysians, and how the Orang Asli people were viewed. Unsurprisingly this generated some hierarchical distinctions and associations, including somewhat unflattering stereotypes towards the Orang Asli 'Other'. In reference to the Orang Asli, assumed differences included a perceived gap of connectivity and networking with the outside world owing to a lack of technology and access to social media. Religious beliefs were, not incorrectly, assumed to be largely animistic but a discerned lower moral status appeared to be attributed to this in animism being viewed as superstitious and backward rather than pious. In this vein, one group made the notably condescending observation that 'not all the OA beliefs are liabilities, some do have assets' (meaning merits). Education was assumed to be low or non-existent and unimportant to the communities in general – 'They need education. They don't understand the importance of education'.

A rather startling (to us) comment made by one group in the exercise referred to Malaysia having three ethnic groups only: Malays, Chinese and Indians – a view loaded with implications in the circumstances of undertaking asset mapping with the

indigenous people, the Orang Asli. This, however, is a message that is reinforced regularly in Malaysia at many different levels, as we were to discover, and therefore was only a repetition of a generally accepted ideological ontology that students have imbibed throughout their lives (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. forthcoming). However, although hierarchies of superiority/inferiority were clearly apparent in the asset mapping exercise, it was instructive to note that students did offer appropriate social and community work values where professional attitudes were couched in terms of 'empathy', as well as 'sympathy', understanding, acceptance, relationship building as well as the assumption that social development was required by the villages. Organizing and undertaking the social development of the villages was regarded as a valid job for social and community work intervention along with recognizing the unique culture of the Orang Asli communities. The following quotation illustrates the position adopted by many of the students:

> 'I would like to identify the position and belief (of) the people and try to understand and put aside our perspective about them. The Orang Asli feel that they are not belonging to the society, they feel powerless, not heard and a vulnerable community. They want to be heard and get the attention from the authority like other communities. To find these kind of things we have to get close and approach them as close friends and try to feel what they feel.'

We were satisfied that students and faculty had engaged with core issues sufficiently to engage reflexively with participatory asset mapping and that faculty staff would guide the work appropriately. Our reflections set out below, however, indicated that we were somewhat mistaken in our assumptions. We have struggled with the ethics of

writing this paper given our involvement with the university where the work was completed, our wish to avoid breaking confidences and the necessarily one-sided nature of our presentation. However, on balance the needs and experiences of the Jakun people demand a critique of their situation and the contexts in which community development is offered and we hope that our reflections will enhance both our own practice and offer a thoughtful narrative for others.

Subsequent approach to asset mapping and consequences

Following the workshop we learned that the students, who were to undertake an assessed piece of work concerning the practice of asset mapping, would not be using participatory approaches. We were concerned about this for a number of reasons. We had, in our research, established trusting relationships with the community and subsequently facilitated re-establishing the relationship between them and the university, despite the damage done through prior misconceptions. We were also concerned that our own ethnographic research and relations with the community could be damaged by the proposed top-down, survey-type approach.

The research we were conducting demonstrated clearly the people's ability to identify problems for themselves and had been able to expressfor themselves the need for things to change. They did not need help recognizing issues. Our teaching of the research evidence and practice of participatory asset mapping was firmly located in social values and we did not believe that a top-down and somewhat patronizing approach of identifying people's problems for them and then suggesting ways out of them would concur with the values espoused. We also considered that a top-down approach could further damage relationships between the university and community,

something we were anxious to avoid having thought we had laid the groundwork for a more positive approach both through the workshop and through our own research. To reiterate, participatory approaches are, we believe, effective and inclusive, enabling communities to develop strategies, sometimes with support, for achieving the changes they have identified. Accordingly, the importance of participation was emphasised to faculty at the university through email and discussion, and again at a subsequent workshop with faculty concerning the Tasik Chini communities. This discussion took place before our next research fieldtrip, which itself coincided with the asset mapping activity. The complexities echoed Kramer et al.'s (2012) discussion of asset mapping, which identified the vast array of approaches and the underlying assumptions often made about assets, needs, communities and how these, in turn, are influenced by contextual dynamics. We had made assumptions of learning through the workshop and leadership through the faculty that were not borne out in practice.

Whilst engaged in our own fieldwork and participating in a wide group discussion about the lake, its deterioration and impact on the people, in the key *kampung* at Tasik Chini, a large coach navigated its nervously way down the narrow asphalt road. This coach carried 50 plus students and faculty ready to complete the asset mapping. The villagers we were speaking to informed us that only the *Tok Batin* (Village Head) had been informed about the students coming and the asset mapping and that he had only been able to inform the *kampungs* the day before, but they did not really know what was involved or why it was happening. We were shocked, as the work had been planned within the students' curriculum some months ago, and the workshop had been held to assist in this planning, and we said so. The villagers were evidently angry

that they had not received prior warning or been involved and resignedly indicated that this power imbalance reflected their prior experience.

Our dismay was compounded still further when we viewed small groups, three to four people in each, with clipboards and dressed in university-labelled peaked caps and shirts walking up to families' doors and asking pre-set questions to survey the families' assets. The anger of the villagers we were with at the time was palpable. Politeness meant that questions were answered and information given but villagers expressed their confusion as to what was happening, that they were being used to test the skills of students and having things done to them rather than participating in mutual and genuine development. Lightfoot et al. (2014) describe the use of participatory asset mapping as a tool for use in research that can offset some of the power imbalances between researchers and researched through developing a genuine participatory approach. Power imbalances are, however, exaggerated when a top-down approach is employed as in this case.

When we arrived at our next fieldwork venue the students and their faculty were already there undertaking their mapping. We briefly met with our participants and then left not wanting to compound the burden on the villagers. On reflection the annoyance we felt at the disruption was probably apparent to both university faculty and the villagers but with different outcomes resulting.

Following this fieldtrip, we asked questions of the students, sending these through the faculty, of their experiences of the participatory methods taught and the non-participatory activity engaged in. We received no responses. This may have been

because we asked the questions in English rather than Bahasa Malaysia, or because the assessment had been completed. It may have been difficult to reconcile the two approaches resulting in no response. We also considered that faculty may not have wished to reflect too deeply on the mismatch between approaches. When we asked faculty why the model of asset mapping was changed it was answered on the grounds of the assignment already being set and it being too difficult to change. There was no consideration of the potential for negative impact on the communities. It seemed to us that there was no intentional disregard but rather ingrained assumptions of power and worth. It raised questions of how this might be addressed.

On our subsequent fieldtrip some weeks later we were informed by prominent village members that the results of the faculty's asset mapping was to be shared with them and that they 'would be told what their needs were' before picking a project to work on together. Again, there was a simmering anger and cynicism expressed. The actions had reinforced a view that the university was not acting with the interests of the villagers at heart and that relationships were low. Later in an interview with a local family, we heard about the findings of the asset mapping exercise as communicated to the representatives of the community. Yet, imparting of information down to the community underlined the lack of equal partnerships assumed in the asset mapping exercise. It transpired that only a small handful of selected members of the community were invited to this meeting, including a member of this family; and incidentally where the authors, as the trainers of the exercise, were denied permission to attend – a message publicly related to us with some embarrassment by the hapless university messenger.

Our informant described the feed-back of the findings as 'weird', where apparently a raft of suggestions were made for the improvement of the community's health and wellbeing, including healthy eating, exercise, preventing diseases by avoiding hypertension, improved teeth brushing, learning new skills like mechanics, and taking up dancing and karaoke. To this rather bizarre and tangential list of self-improvement ideas, a community representative indignantly pointed out the irrelevance of such measures to the ecological disaster unfolding in the community's midst, asking directly why the asset mapping exercise had not addressed the damage to the local environment and its biodiversity as the critical issue. No adequate answer was forthcoming. 'They are wasting our time. They don't hear what we want – they are just twisting around what we want!' our informant angrily summed up to us.

Our own discomfort was intense in having been instrumental in training the students in a participatory and communal information-gathering exercise that was designed to be intrinsically empowering and helpful to both the community and the university, but which had gone so badly askew, and resulted in even more compromised relationships. Our own exclusion from the feedback meeting was, fortunately, recognised by the community who had witnessed our various setbacks and thus did not appear to damage our personalised/professional research relationships with them. In this respect, the fact that we had been publicly *dis*-invited from the meeting, while actually waiting to enter it, had also been noted by community members, and serendipitously this may have worked in our favour as underlining our *bona fide* credentials as ethical researchers committed to the community we were working with, in keeping with indigenous methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012). However, it did undoubtedly create an initial discomfort between ourselves and our host

university, something we needed to work hard on to re-establish a working relationship in which we could share our misgivings and suggest forward plans that may work better for the *kampungs* and the university. It is to promote this understanding further that we wrote this reflexive paper.

Ways forward

The learning gained from this episode reinforces the centrality of participatory methods as a means of engaging with people. Not working with and alongside people within a community emphasizes the power imbalance and raises questions about that research, its efficacy, who it is for and why it is being undertaken. It is important when working with disadvantaged or marginalized groups that people within them fully participate, as co-researchers, and can steer the direction of their lives and communities.

Our own experience of carrying out training in asset mapping where the outcome of that training did not reflect the values and approaches we had espoused leads us to consider some hard questions regarding our role and that of our trainees. On reflection we feel that we should have explored in much more detail to what ends the training would actually be put. This is sensitive point given our status as guests under the patronage of a powerful host and it is likely that too many assumptions were made on both sides regarding the purpose of the training. Our assumption was that this training would be put to use by directly engaging with the methodology as it was taught. Thus, to the question now formulated as ‘to what uses will the training be put?’, we would add the issue of responsibility, of trainers and trainees. It is everyone’s responsibility, so far as is possible, that the methodological approaches are underpinned by the

principles and values of that methodology in any subsequent research exercise which that training purportedly informs. Such a commitment on both sides should be addressed within the training as a key principle for common agreement before training commences. Again, this raises difficult issues in regards to the niceties of training that may not be ultimately realized in the negotiation for such activities.

Social and community work champions critical reflexivity, asking difficult and searching questions of ourselves, our values, actions and the potential and actual consequences of those values and actions. The challenge for community workers is not to accept the 'givens' of politicians and others with authority, including universities, but to critique and to question these, and especially to challenge where political and governmental stances are detrimental to others or trespass on people's rights. This is not easy. Indeed, where a government is overtly promoting policies that at the surface level indicate inclusion, development and multi-ethnic rights for all, such as the 1Malaysia policy (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2010; see also the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2015), it may seem churlish to do so. However, social and community workers need to question, understand and to work at the margins of society, and not to subject authorities to rigorous critique fails to discharge our responsibilities. Adopting a political stance is important and this may carry aspects of social activism – the moral positioning of such sitting uncomfortably with *de facto* alliance with government-run or funded organizations like universities and research centres with which researchers necessarily interact. However, we would recommend that future assessed work on participatory asset mapping or community engagement is planned well in advance, and that its design is undertaken directly with the people and communities affected; indeed, it should derive from those communities.

We would also, where possible, ensure that we had more adequate time to evaluate any learning and teaching we deliver and hold follow-up sessions before participants engaged with communities. Any further training undertaken will ensure that communities are fully engaged from the outset so that student practice is not simply a matter of practising upon a community, often with little thought for those affected. Rather, the participatory approach should begin from the moment of initial training itself.

A code of practice that details the principles, values and key issues to bear in mind when undertaking community engagement research would be a useful asset for universities to develop. This, again, should include people who have been or may be participants in such research to ensure that a representative voice is included. The bureaucratization of research practice is something that we, the authors, tend to avoid or rail against where possible. However, in this case it could be helpful to review, in a developmental and helpful way, how researchers are going to meet a code of practice on community research. This could be educational for faculty and students and also inclusive and participatory of all stakeholders involved. In this way, if not too onerous, it could promote the essence of participatory approaches.

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